

Equity Agenda:

Recommendations for Improving the Accessibility of National Service



July 2022

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Introduction

National service through AmeriCorps has been an incredible opportunity for more than one million young Americans to spend a year serving communities and the nation, giving of themselves to create a more perfect union. Service years are an opportunity that transform lives, strengthen communities, and fuel civic renewal. Yet, the opportunity to serve remains out of reach for many young Americans. With some policy and programmatic changes, national service has the opportunity to be



one of the most important means through which the nation can advance equity, giving young people from underserved communities opportunities to learn, grow, network, lead, and connect to a future that might have otherwise been unknown or unavailable to them. In the following report, Service Year Alliance outlines suggestions to make national service more equitable and accessible to prospective corps members – and community-based organizations – from underserved communities. Many of these proposed solutions stem from our public comment submission to AmeriCorps on [equity](#), the [criminal history check process](#) and [matching fund requirements](#), as well as our white paper to the Biden administration, [Reimagining National Service: A Roadmap to a Service Presidency](#). We have also drawn on recommendations and lessons learned from other partners in the field, including [America's Service Commissions](#), [The Next 100](#), and [America Forward](#).

This equity agenda is divided into two sections: the first related to opening up opportunities to serve for potential corps members from diverse and underserved communities, and the other focused on increasing the accessibility of AmeriCorps grantmaking for programs supporting those communities. While this report primarily focuses on how to make AmeriCorps, the primary domestic national service program, more accessible, it does also touch on opportunities to improve equity in other national service programs, like the Peace Corps, where applicable.

Improving Accessibility for Young People from Underserved Communities



Young people from underserved communities – including low-income youth, out-of-school and out-of-work youth (referred to as “opportunity youth”), formerly foster care youth, immigrant youth, racially diverse youth, and youth with disabilities – face barriers to participation in national service for a variety of reasons.

These young people may not be aware that national service opportunities are available to them, requiring more robust awareness campaigns from messengers they know and trust. They may also feel like they do not qualify to participate – or don’t belong – in national service, or simply that national service opportunities will not provide them with the benefits they need to support themselves and their families. Finally, statute often restricts the ability of some populations to serve, due to their immigration status or previous interaction with the justice system. Young people from all walks of life bring a lot to the table in terms of skills, talents, and lived experience that would allow them to thrive in national service, and the following recommendations outline opportunities for federal partners and programs to best support and retain these youth.

Strengthening the Quality and Value Proposition of Service Years

- *Increase the living allowance*
- *Provide a meaningful education award*
- *Eliminate the tax of the education award and living allowance*
- *Strengthen wraparound services to include housing support, transportation, improved child care support, mental health services, and mentorship and coaching*
- *Increase the flexibility of match requirements to better sustain wraparound services*
- *Encourage and support state service commissions to offer additional post-service support for corps members and alums*

The current AmeriCorps **living allowance** is tied to the federal poverty level. Many service year corps members are eligible to receive food stamps and have challenges meeting basic needs. Low stipends make it challenging to recruit and retain low-income youth into national service, who, when faced with choices, opt for employment opportunities which might provide an initial higher starting salary but potentially less opportunity for building the technical skills, social capital, and professional networks that national service can provide. Increasing the AmeriCorps living allowance to 200% of the federal poverty line (currently equivalent to \$15 per hour) with regional adjustments for cost of living, would allow all young Americans to choose national service as a financially sustainable option on their career journey. Surveys of programs and current/former corps members indicate that the low living allowance is a major barrier, if not the primary barrier, to the accessibility of service.

We are grateful to AmeriCorps leadership for their attention to this issue in their [Equity Action Plan](#) and other public remarks, and look forward to addressing it collaboratively. We also appreciate that the Peace Corps similarly is in the process of working to dismantle similar financial burdens to service as laid out in the agency's [Equity Action Plan](#).



One of the most appealing benefits of national service that corps members receive after completion of their service is the AmeriCorps Segal **Education Award**, which can be used towards student loans or future higher education expenses. Currently, the award is tied to the Pell grant amount, which has lost significant purchasing power as tuition continues to rise faster than the award amount. Compounding this problem, the award itself is considered taxable income, despite its restrictions on educational usage. Substantially increasing the education award to double the Pell grant would further incentivize youth to participate in national service, and could, in turn, drive more young people to attend and complete college or other postsecondary training. Expanding the allowable uses of the education award to cover short-term credentials, other workforce training...

and basic needs expenses during postsecondary education would help corps members use the award in the way that best serves their career goals.

The **tax on the education award** also siphons off resources intended to boost corps members' future professional prospects. This high tax burden can unintentionally encourage young people to exit national service programs early, minimizing the financial incentive to complete a service year. Eliminating the tax would put the education award more in-line with similar military education benefits in the post-9/11 GI Bill. Making the education award and living allowance tax-free would dramatically improve the value proposition of national service, encouraging more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate.

Additional wraparound services such as housing and, in some instances, childcare assistance can make the difference when it comes to national service being a feasible option for all young Americans. Housing in many of the locations in which people serve is prohibitively expensive, pushing corps members to live far from the communities in which they serve or in unsafe living conditions. Programs can address this by providing housing or a separate housing stipend for their corps members. Similarly, a lack of childcare can be a barrier to participation for young parents or those supporting children. Restrictions on the amount of income a corps member can earn and the amount and type of childcare assistance a corps member can receive often prevents corps members with children from getting the help they need during a service year. In particular, AmeriCorps childcare assistance is restricted to center-based care, unlike other federal programs which are able to compensate family members for home-based care, and is also limited to parenting corps members, deeming ineligible corps members who might be responsible for the care of elderly family members or young siblings. Loosening these restrictions would make it easier for young people, including those who are parenting or have other care taking responsibilities to opt into national service. The agency and programs should also work together to pursue automatic enrollment/re-enrollment into applicable support programs for opportunity youth corps members, for programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) and Medicaid. Disruptions in wraparound services can cause opportunity youth to exit early from service programs, and anticipating and minimizing those disruptions help keep opportunity youth corps members engaged and on track.

Currently, AmeriCorps programs receive limited federal funding to cover costs associated with each person who serves.

This funding must be supplemented with matching funds from non-governmental sources, the total of which dictates the maximum investment programs can make in an individual's national service experience. Ability to obtain matching funding therefore directly impacts the types of training, wraparound services, and additional benefits that programs can provide their corps members. Matching funds required by AmeriCorps, and by the other federal national service programs, are intended to ensure community commitment to national service but can be particularly onerous for programs working with opportunity youth, who may need to invest more in wraparound services and supports. **Incorporating flexibility in the AmeriCorps match requirement and eliminating the match scale** would allow programs that engage opportunity youth and serve under-resourced communities to better engage individuals in their programs without the burden of securing additional match funding to meet the higher cost for support. This flexibility would allow for additional training and wraparound services that can equip these national service programs to serve as effective pathways to education or careers for opportunity youth in particular. For more on this topic, please see our recent [public comment submission](#) on suggested matching funds reforms.



Finally, support for corps members should not drop off after they complete national service. Funding should be devoted to allow programs and commissions to offer and coordinate alumni support services, including ongoing professional development, mentoring and counseling, and material support to assist corps members with their transition into future school or employment opportunities.

These offerings should be inclusive for all types of service alumni, including Peace Corps alumni relocating stateside after their term of service. AmeriCorps and Peace Corps can help to facilitate alumni services by working to release access to service alumni data to the organizations leading the national alumni networks, so that programs and commissions can continue to stay in touch and support these young professionals as they move into the workforce.

Increasing Awareness Among Underrepresented Youth

- *Develop recruitment messaging strategies and engage trusted messengers in partnership with underrepresented youth*
- *Invest in a modern, online search tool which catalogs all types of service year opportunities*
- *Support the creation of language inclusive outreach materials and hiring of bilingual recruitment staff to facilitate service opportunities for non-native English speaking youth*
- *Build strong and new partnerships with local organizations to increase awareness*
- *Dedicate resources to expanded recruitment efforts among historically underrepresented groups, and/or fund grantees to do the same*

Over the past five years, Service Year Alliance has conducted a national, online recruitment and awareness campaign to promote national service participation. However, national media campaigns can only go so far, and reaching young people where they are – virtually or in-person – requires thoughtful strategies and targeted efforts. It is critical to **develop recruitment and awareness campaigns directly with young people from diverse backgrounds**, intentionally centering their voices and opinions in message development, to better understand where they seek information on career and postsecondary opportunities and which messengers are trusted and most influential.

Young people may have heard of one specific service year program, but are not aware of the diverse range of national service opportunities available to them. The recent National Commission on Military, National and Public Service recommended that Congress support the creation of a state-of-the-art **online, searchable database** which would allow prospective participants to identify national service opportunities in the career area they hope to pursue and located in the geographic area where they want to serve. This online database should include AmeriCorps, YouthBuild and Peace Corps opportunities, along with other service and conservation corps opportunities that might not receive federal funding.

More robust awareness efforts should also include **language inclusive outreach materials and bilingual recruitment staff** at the agency and program level, catering to youth who might primarily speak a language other than English.

We are glad to see AmeriCorps leading on language inclusivity recruitment materials in their [recent equity action plan](#), and would encourage the Peace Corps to take similar steps. We want to applaud Peace Corps for their intentionality in hosting bilingual information nights for prospective applicants, and would urge them to broaden this approach to all aspects of the Peace Corps application process.

Social media is a powerful tool that is used by [99% of youth](#), but diving deeper into [partnerships with diverse community institutions](#) – including K-12 and higher education institutions like HBCUs, HSIs and MSIs, faith based organizations, service providers, and more – can help amplify national service opportunities. Supporting current, diverse corps members in sharing their stories and experiences online and providing them with messaging tools to do so could also be useful in reaching a more diverse audience of youth.

AmeriCorps could also consider providing grantees and/or state service commissions with resources to hire recruiters to work specifically in diverse communities, intentionally investing to drive application rates. Peace Corps, for example, has a multimillion dollar annual [agency recruitment budget](#) for their several thousand service year positions. Domestic service year programs, like AmeriCorps and YouthBuild, could benefit from similar federal investments in dedicated recruitment funding, as well as alignment and coordination across national service agencies.

Fostering a Belonging Culture & Promoting Professional Development

- *Encourage programs to incorporate inclusion and cultural competency trainings for corps members*
- *Create clear pathways to education and employment, including strengthening pre-apprenticeship opportunities*
- *Improve access to Public Service Loan Forgiveness for national service alumni*
- *Build flexibility into the 80/20 rule to allow additional career training, skill building, and civic engagement and leadership*
- *Work with host countries to be more accepting of Peace Corps volunteers without a postsecondary credential*



In order to better recruit and retain diverse corps members, programs and commissions must commit to improve the diversity of their own staff as well as intentionally invest time and effort into building a belonging culture for all corps members. Corps members should be able to see themselves among the staff and leadership of their programs. Part of this will require a mindset shift in some community-based organizations, recognizing the assets and strengths of disadvantaged communities and transitioning away from a deficit-oriented mindset. AmeriCorps programs with **training specifically tailored to encourage cultural competence and promote belonging and inclusion** often do a better job of retaining diverse corps members. Programs which incorporate formal or informal mentorship opportunities into the service year itself, have also seen success on this front. We are encouraged to also see Peace Corps intentionally reviewing their onboarding and post operations policies and practices to foster an anti-racist, inclusive culture, and will continue to monitor the agency's progress toward their stated equity goals in this regard.

Without clear pathways into careers or education, national service remains a difficult choice for young people, especially those from economically disadvantaged families. **Embedding more pathways to workforce development** directly into programs and better advertising these opportunities would incentivize service and set young people up for success. For example, the Department of Labor should encourage more AmeriCorps programs to operate as pre-apprenticeships. Formal apprenticeships are restrictive and challenging to reconcile with AmeriCorps requirements.

Pre-apprenticeships, however, are easier to align with AmeriCorps programming, and the Department of Labor, AmeriCorps, employers, and unions should work together to incentivize their incorporation into national service programs through additional on-ramps and funding opportunities to strengthen the service-to-workforce connection. Additionally, the Department of Labor should explicitly designate national service programs as eligible for consideration as work-based learning under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which would allow programs to better incorporate industry-recognized credentials into their programs. For more on how AmeriCorps can better leverage workforce development in service years, please see our recommendations for the [WIOA reauthorization](#).

Congress should allow all service year corps members to receive preferential hiring and **non-competitive eligibility for federal jobs**, to build out the pipeline into public service careers for service-minded young professionals. The federal government currently provides a non-competitive hiring authority for individuals who complete the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps VISTA. By extending this authority to everyone who completes a year of national service, including AmeriCorps State and National, NCCC and YouthBuild corps members, and extending the eligibility status for three years, the federal government would not only incentivize national service and meet their growing hiring needs, but also would provide a pathway into public service for highly motivated, civically-minded young Americans. Intentionally building out these career pathways could also be a great recruitment opportunity for corps members from marginalized communities.

In order to receive [Public Service Loan Forgiveness](#) (PSLF), an individual must be working full-time in a public service position and making regular qualifying payments. National service participants are eligible to defer their student loans during their term of service, but as such they typically are not making any qualifying payments during service. This deferral, while helpful on a low living allowance, delays their ability to receive PSLF, despite the fact that they are indeed engaged in meaningful public service. **National service participants should be granted an exception to allow their service term to count towards PSLF requirements**, even if they pursue loan deferrals and are not making payments.

The [current system](#) allows AmeriCorps and Peace Corps members to either apply their Segal award or Peace Corps transition payment to count for one full year of payments immediately after they complete service, or alternatively, to pursue an income-driven repayment plan instead of deferment, with some borrowers required to pay \$0 per month. Both of these options add significant administrative burden to national service alumni, and require them to have full awareness of these bureaucratic details when initiating or completing the service term. It would make more sense for the Dept. of Education's Federal Student Aid office to grant a blanket exception to all national service alumni for PSLF, instead of requiring them to jump through administrative hoops.

The **80/20 rule**, which dictates the split between percentage of hours dedicated to direct service vs. training national service participants, is an obstacle to AmeriCorps programs seeking to offer greater professional development to their corps members. By eliminating the rule entirely, or introducing a simplified waiver process, programs could do a better job of incorporating career and technical skills training into their program design, another incentive opportunity for recruiting low-income corps members.

The Peace Corps has also observed that many host countries prefer to host Peace Corps volunteers with a college degree, which creates a level of exclusivity and privilege around who is able to serve, given the race and class disparities in postsecondary completion rates. We would encourage the Peace Corps to proactively work with host countries to **intentionally develop service year opportunities for those without a college degree**, either with some college credit and/or for those who have gone straight into the workforce from high school. The Peace Corps is not alone in this dilemma, with many AmeriCorps programs also unnecessarily requiring degree attainment for national service positions. While a degree may be useful for some service year opportunities, it should not be a prerequisite for all service year options. Unpacking and dismantling the bias toward degree requirements and understanding the multi-faceted needs of non-degree holders will do a lot to expand service year opportunities to more diverse populations. Of course, these policy fixes behind the scenes to bolster national service as a career and higher education pathway will also need to be broadcast to youth from marginalized communities, encouraging demand and awareness of the role of service years in the postsecondary space.

Broadening Eligibility and Accommodation

- *Improve access for justice-involved, immigrant, tribal, and other underrepresented youth*
- *Expand eligibility for young people with different immigration statuses to participate in all AmeriCorps programs*
- *Improve AmeriCorps programs' ability to access funding for reasonable accommodations and generally support improved disability inclusion wherever possible*



AmeriCorps should explore best practices for intentionally incorporating **justice-involved youth** in national service and prioritize these programs for grants. While AmeriCorps does not bar most justice-involved youth from participating in its programs, programs often see [background checks](#) as expensive and burdensome and simply choose not to work with this community. Additionally, the onerous criminal history check process required has proven to be not only an unnecessary financial and overhead burden for AmeriCorps grantees, but also a significant barrier to justice-involved individuals applying for positions, and it should be reexamined and [improved](#). Investing in national service programming specifically designed for young Americans who are justice-involved can help create an exit ramp from the school-to-prison pipeline that provides them with opportunities for new futures.

Currently, refugees, asylees, and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients are only eligible to participate in national service as AmeriCorps VISTA members, and they are not eligible for the education award after completing their service. Yet there are thousands of enthusiastic, patriotic young people who would love an opportunity to serve their adopted country.

Programs are also clamoring for ways to involve **immigrant youth** in national service, particularly in areas of the country with large immigrant populations.

Unaccompanied minors, who generally are on a fast-track to citizenship as they age out of the federal foster care system, should also be able to participate in national service, as it provides a supportive environment as they transition into self-sufficiency and employment. Young people without citizenship are also blocked from participating in the Peace Corps, including those with legal resident status. Some AmeriCorps programs work specifically with new arrivals, refugees, and other migrant groups, and it would be appropriate for national service corps members to reflect the communities they serve.

[Several states](#) have taken steps in the right direction here, to allow immigrant youth service alumni to receive state scholarships or a cash equivalent of similar value to the AmeriCorps Segal award, but more can be done by AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps and Congress to recruit, engage and support these young people.

Congress and the Administration should pursue changes to statute to allow young people with refugee, asylee, and legal migrant status backgrounds into all national service positions as well as to earn education awards. Such a change would help open up access to individuals and communities who currently are limited in their ability to serve this nation. These flexibilities exist to an extent for certain immigrant youth to serve in the military, and thus precedent exists to open up opportunities for civilian national service as well. These young people would also bring significant skills and lived experiences to their service – like cultural competence and linguistic fluency – that would make programs more effective in serving communities with different cultures and languages.

Currently, AmeriCorps sets aside two percent of all funding to support **reasonable accommodations for national service participants with disabilities**, although programs continue to report that these funds are difficult to obtain. Programs are encouraged to seek outside funding to support accommodation expenses, and while they can apply for this supplemental federal financial support, they are expected to invest in the accommodation costs up-front and apply for reimbursement which may or may not be approved, putting the burden of accessibility expenses on the program as opposed to the federal agency.

Congressional intent clearly indicates that national service was intended to be accessible to young people with disabilities, and AmeriCorps should make these accommodation support funds more accessible to programs, and also incorporate specific accommodation process and alumni experiences more clearly into recruitment materials. We want to applaud the Peace Corps for their disability inclusive recruitment and FAQ page, which highlights the long history of Peace Corps volunteers with disabilities and provides testimonials from recent alumni with disabilities, offering prospective Peace Corps volunteers a clear picture of how they can serve, regardless of disability status.

Improving Accessibility for Organizations Serving Underrepresented Communities

Small and locally-based organizations often struggle to access federal grants for national service positions, particularly AmeriCorps funding. The agency – and intermediary organizations like state service commissions, among others – can do much more to provide technical assistance to these organizations, helping them to unlock previously inaccessible federal funding streams. This section is only applicable to AmeriCorps, given that the Peace Corps does not operate as a grant-making agency.



Better support grantees and build on-ramps to becoming grantees

- *Increase the cost per Member Service Year (MSY) provided to grantee organizations*
- *Create flexibility in match requirements*
- *Invest in new program development by AmeriCorps and state service commissions and develop intentional new grantee on-ramps (planning grants) for underserved communities*
- *Update and streamline the grantee organization application systems and ensure that all organizational application documents are comprehensible and accessible for grantees*

Statutory limitations on maximum **cost per member service year (MSY)** that AmeriCorps programs are able to support restricts the ability of programs to truly invest in corps members that might need additional wraparound support, like opportunity youth. This, in turn, disincentivizes programs from recruiting corps members who might require these supplemental support services, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy and putting up additional barriers to recruiting and retaining corps members from underserved communities. Increasing the cost per MSY would allow programs to raise living allowances and increase wraparound services, better investing in corps members who need additional support.

Moreover, programs that receive AmeriCorps funding must also match a portion of that funding with supplemental dollars, either from other federal streams or state, local, or philanthropic resources. In the first year of an AmeriCorps grant, programs must obtain 25% match through other funding sources, increasing to a 1:1 match in the third year of the program. **Improving the flexibility of match requirements and reducing the match scale** would allow programs to better engage with opportunity youth and under-resourced communities, reducing the burden of securing supplemental match funding to meet the higher costs of supporting these members. Additional flexibilities would allow for additional training, material supports, and wraparound services to help national service programs meet the needs of opportunity youth in particular. Some communities also do not have the depth of philanthropic support that other communities have access to, and increasing match flexibility would recognize that all communities are deserving of resources provided by national service despite limitations on ability to secure matching funds. For more on this topic, please see our [public comment submission](#) on reforming match funding requirements and match scale.

To ensure all communities can access national service resources, AmeriCorps and state service commissions should significantly **invest in new program development and new grantee on-ramps for underserved communities and organizations**, including deliberate technical assistance planning grants to help smaller organizations increase their capacity to apply for AmeriCorps grants. This should also include a targeted waiving of match fund requirements for new or smaller organizations operating in underserved communities or led and operated by proximate leaders as well as additional investments through Title J of the Serve America Act. State service commissions play a key role in this process and require flexibility to respond to the needs in their states and communities, identify areas which may be underserved, and build relationships with smaller organizations and organizations operating in underserved communities. State commissions should recognize that their state Notice of Funding does not need to mirror or mimic the complex requirements listed in the competitive AmeriCorps National Direct funding application, and should aim to streamline their application to encourage and support new organizations in underserved communities in seeking out funding. Texas and South Carolina commissions, for example, have done an excellent job to reconfigure their grant application from a user design and ease-of-access perspective.

Many programs and partners have identified how complex and outdated the application systems are for grantees, creating a huge capacity challenge for programs and often requiring them to bring in outside expertise to navigate the system successfully. This is particularly unattainable for smaller, community-based organizations and those with limited English proficiency. **Investing in modern, user-centric technology** will be vastly helpful for small and under-resourced grantees to access AmeriCorps funds.

Encouraging creative civic infrastructure to support small and place-based organizations

- *Establish a national service fellowship and support the development of national and place-based intermediary programs that can place corps members at smaller community-based organizations*
- *Consider best practices for building an ecosystem of investment in national service through place-based initiatives and collaboration to develop the infrastructure to reduce capacity burden and better support corps members*



Per a recent study, AmeriCorps programs tend to operate in communities with larger, more active civic infrastructure and institutions, indicating that smaller, more rural and less densely populated communities have challenges accessing national service resources.

Organizations without deep administrative knowledge on how to operate and apply for AmeriCorps grants, including faith-based organizations and rural, tribal, and other small organizations, need access to civic infrastructure which can help them connect to AmeriCorps corps members.



Intermediary organizations can help place corps members at smaller nonprofits, managing the administrative burden of the grant, providing training and support for corps members while still offering host sites the benefits of extra capacity that AmeriCorps members can provide. Intermediary organizations can also offer smaller host sites technical assistance to run their own AmeriCorps grants down the road. Making regulations like cost per MSY and evaluation requirements more flexible for intermediary organizations would allow them to flourish and support underserved communities in a more robust way.

Congress could also authorize state commissions to directly place individual corps members at small community-based organizations, allowing commissions to function in an intermediary role and providing national service opportunities (and capacity) to underserved communities. This is one method of operating a **service fellowship model**, which would help open up national service opportunities for organizations which might not have the administrative capacity to support complex federal grants. Another option would be to fund the Serve America fellows provisions in the Serve America Act, or both direct placement and fellows could be funded simultaneously.

Many AmeriCorps grantees operate independently in their community, despite the presence of other programs or nonprofits doing complimentary work. This means that grantees of all sizes are missing out on an opportunity to recruit local youth, reduce some of their capacity challenges, create better training opportunities and cohort experiences, and plug into a broader ecosystem of collaboration and support. Communities that have **coordinating, place-based infrastructure** in place deliver service more effectively, have a higher return on investment, and have better outcomes for corps members. They can offer smaller, community-based organizations a strong support network to make being an AmeriCorps grantee less of a capacity challenge, or allow them to scale more effectively. AmeriCorps should consider offering planning grants for place-based national service initiatives to better build out this infrastructure. In addition to offering on-ramps and support networks for smaller community-based organizations, place-based initiatives also ensure that organizations are working collaboratively to address community needs.



Reconfiguring data and evaluation systems

- *Reassess the metrics that AmeriCorps uses to measure success for programs*
- *Regularly collect and release more comprehensive data on AmeriCorps members, alums, and grantees, including AmeriCorps member exit survey data and demographics to programs*
- *Encourage state commissions to set goals for diversity and inclusion of grantee leadership and state commission membership*
- *Reconsider early exit penalties for new/small fixed price grantees*

AmeriCorps' current **metrics of success for programs** are heavily focused on successful corps member enrollment and retention, in order to determine if programs are on track and whether programs will continue to receive the same level of funding. As a result, programs prioritize enrolling corps members who they believe have the highest likelihood of finishing the program, often biasing towards applicants with higher education credentials. This is a big barrier to incentivizing recruitment of populations who might appear to be "riskier" when it comes to retention and completion of their service term, but could offer valuable community relationships and lived experience to the program. AmeriCorps should modify metrics to better incentivize programs to focus on recruiting and supporting corps members from underserved communities. As a start, the agency should examine the effectiveness of current metrics that are used to gauge the success of programs and continued funding. It should also examine alternative metrics that would allow programs to define success in part through the corps member experience and outcomes – and incentivize an investment in corps members' skills development, including both soft and technical skills. Further, the agency should consider whether evaluating existing metrics at the end of a three-year grant, rather than for each individual year, would positively improve the recruitment and retention of underrepresented populations.

Corps members currently respond to AmeriCorps-administered **member exit surveys** that can collect a wide array of useful information. However, those surveys are only released to the public in aggregate, and no individual program has access to the feedback from their corps members, nor do state commissions. This means that if a program wants to understand the experiences and growth of their corps members, they must administer their own, often duplicative survey, adding additional administrative work to off-boarding corps members for both programs and for the corps members themselves. AmeriCorps should release aggregate exit survey results to programs to allow those programs to understand their own successes and challenges, and analyze disparities across diverse populations, if corps member anonymity can be prioritized.

On a related note, AmeriCorps should **release aggregate diversity data** collected through member exit surveys to state commissions, allowing them to better understand the diversity of corps members serving in their state and to work towards improvement.

State commissions in notice of funding might request that applicants offer demographic data on their programs leadership, to get a sense of where gaps might exist. State commissions could also do a better job of setting goals for the **diversity of commission board members**, incorporating targets for underserved communities. We recognize that the agency is taking concrete steps in this direction with their Diversity Questionnaire for grantees, and would encourage them to continue refining that tool and releasing aggregate data to state commissions and programs, as appropriate, to establish a baseline and track efforts to improve equitable participation.

Fixed price grants' regulatory restrictions can also be challenging for small community-based organizations and those who are new AmeriCorps grantees to manage, with organizations on the hook financially if corps members leave their term of service early. Clawing back grant funds for members who may have served half or more of their term but not fully completed fails to recognize the amount of resources a non-profit organization puts into each AmeriCorps member throughout the service term. **Harsh financial penalties on fixed price grantees for early corps member exits** dissuades small and rural non-profits, and those from marginalized communities from applying for AmeriCorps grants or enrolling corps members who require significant wraparound supports. The agency could consider reducing some of that financial risk to new and small grantees if corps members serve at least 75% of their service hours, to retain grantees and foster their continued participation in AmeriCorps.

Conclusion

Service Year Alliance strongly believes that all young Americans should have the opportunity to participate in, grow personally and professionally, and support their communities through a service year, whether that be through domestic programs like AmeriCorps and YouthBuild or international programs like the Peace Corps. Promoting equity in national service will require much more than improved recruitment strategies to bring young people from diverse communities into service. It will require programs, commissions, and federal government leaders to examine and dismantle barriers to service, including financial, material, and organizational culture barriers to service. It will also require re-examining eligibility criteria to be more inclusive of young people from all walks of life. And finally, domestic national service agencies will need to do the hard work to make these opportunities accessible to community-based organizations in small, rural, and marginalized communities, ensuring that resources are available to communities that have previously been left behind. Service years have a triple bottom line, helping address urgent community needs, providing pathways to career and postsecondary education for young people, and fostering civic renewal, and if national service is not accessible to all participants and communities, it will not live up to these laudable goals.

For more information about Service Year Alliance's policy priorities and efforts to increase equity in national service, visit serviceyearalliance.org/equity_agenda.



www.ServiceYearAlliance.org